



Defense Information School

Fort George G. Meade, MD

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For more than a decade our military has been engaged in persistent conflict in multiple theaters of war. During this prolonged period, our military leaders and service members have been at the forefront of media reporting, as the fourth estate carried out its first amendment responsibilities to keep the American people informed regarding our military and combat operations overseas.

Having withdrawn most of our service members from Iraq, and with the impending draw down of forces from Afghanistan, our public affairs and visual information professionals will still be required to tell the awesome story of our military, but more so from a garrison environment. This change will require a different focus, because there will not always be embedded media aggressively leaning forward to tell the story in a garrison environment.

Develop a Garrison-based Engagement Plan—The way we conduct media engagement in a garrison environment versus in combat theaters of operation is essentially a paradigm shift. However, this change doesn't mean that communication planning is no longer required. Just as in combat operations, working in a garrison environment will require detailed planning to outline desired effects, audiences, themes and messages, spokespersons, platforms of engagement (print, radio, social media, television, etc.), and measures of effectiveness.

Outreach and Transparency—Who are the media players in your garrison environment: local, regional, or national? If you haven't already, seek them out and invite them to your installation for a tour. Arrange to give them a briefing on your units operations, and introduce the media to commanders and key leaders (military and civilian). Set up an "off-the-record" social time with individual members of the media and individual key leaders, which will help to establish a relationship based on trust and credibility. Other options you might consider include presentations to local/regional professional media organizations (e.g., Society for Professional Journalists, state journalism associations, etc.) or inviting local media to observe a local or deployed exercise or scheduled training.

Outline The Story You Want The Media To Tell and Provide Context—PA/VI professionals have an opportunity to not only shape the communications environment in our units, but also encourage the press to tell our stories. National, regional, and local media organizations, all conduct daily production meetings to wade through topics of interest and decide which events to cover during a reporting cycle.

It's important that PA/VI professionals invest the time in developing relationships with media producers and reporters. It's those producers and reporters who will present information you've provided at production meetings, which determines if a unit's operations or events will be covered. This will require effective and compelling communication—both written and oral—because you're competing against other stories, and probably working with news organizations with limited resources. Remember that cooperation is a two-way street. You need to make sure you are cooperative with the media long before you come calling with your story ideas. Always be prompt when responding to their inquiries and respect their deadlines.

Implement a Smart Social Media Plan—Over a decade ago social media wasn't the tremendous communications asset it has become today. Social media can be a powerful tool for enhancing garrison communications and reaching various audiences if used in a thoughtful and deliberate manner. PA/VI professionals have to be subject matter experts in the art of effective social media usage, and provide advice and counsel to commanders and senior leaders about how best to employ this powerful communications tool.

Don't Forget Radio—When developing your garrison communications strategy, don't forget radio. Outside the beltway in different regions of the country, as well as overseas, radio is still a great communications platform which reaches millions. Broadcast reporters often complement their news pieces with print articles, which enhances your units coverage. Engage with your local and regional radio outlets to generate stories



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and coverage of your units. It will also provide a great platform for getting you and your key leaders interview experience, which will help ensure you're all seasoned for more high-profile exposure.

Exploit What is Already in Place—Ensure the command newspaper is readily available “out in town.” Maintain a sharp, current, PowerPoint community bulletin board on the base news channel and on any public access channels. Never have even a company level change of command without inviting local civilian leadership and local media. Develop and maintain strong partnerships with military service organizations, which will enhance outreach and support for service members and families. Make sure your hometown news release program is being effectively managed. Reach out like never before!

We don't yet know what the post 2014 PA/VI units will look like in our garrisons and in the fleet. What we do know is that it will be more important than ever to tell the American people the story of their military, and why we remain relevant, especially in times of economic uncertainty.